

## Conference Paper

# Telecollaborative Language Learning

Šárka Sladovnicková

VSB – Technical University of Ostrava, Poruba, Czech Republic

## Abstract

In recent years, we can witness a still growing interest in the method, sometimes called Telecollaboration, sometimes Virtual Exchange, not only in foreign language education but also in many other disciplines. Basically, this is a long online communication between groups of students or pupils from different geographical locations and different cultural contexts. The aim of this method is to help students gain intercultural experience and learn more about people from other countries, to improve and deepen their language skills and make them more active in physical mobility, both in formal and informal educational processes. As part of their schooling or academic training, learners also have the opportunity to acquire media competences (the so-called digital literacy), which means key competences for their future career in the globalized world of work. This paper is going to provide an example of concrete collaboration between groups of students from the Czech Republic and France within the framework of the Evolve project.

**Keywords:** telecollaboration, virtual exchange, language skills, intercultural experience

Corresponding Author:

Šárka Sladovnicková

sarka.sladovnikova@vsb.cz

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## 1. Introduction

A few years ago, it was impossible to find references to telecollaboration in magazines, books or online, with the exception of a few specific sections of conferences or academic publications. A number of articles and collections of materials on this subject were published at the beginning of the 21st century in English-language literature [1]. Today, there are numerous studies available that document the diversity of online exchanges and projects (see the systematic review of Lewis and O'Dowd [2, 26-47]). Their distribution was rapid, yet there is a lack of institutional recognition and supportive implementation in educational programmes.

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## 2. Collaborative Learning within the Framework of the EVOLVE Project

Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange aims at mainstream Virtual Exchange as an innovative form of collaborative international learning across disciplines in Higher Education institutions in Europe and beyond. EVOLVE will promote the awareness and implementation of Virtual Exchange by:

- Implementing online collaborative training and accreditation for educators to support their continuous professional development;
- Conducting state-of-the art research to measure its impact at the level of students, educators and institutions to educators, policy and decision makers in Higher Education institutions;
- Engaging with policy and decision makers at institutional, national and European levels to demonstrate good practices of Virtual Exchange and present research results demonstrating its impact at student, educator and institution levels [<https://evolve-erasmus.eu/about-evolve/>].

### 2.1. Looking back and looking forward

Despite the ever-increasing popularity of telecollaboration, in the world of education this is not news at all. Naturally, the technology used to design and support exchange methods among the distant partners has changed, but cooperation has been in place for many years, at least for a century. The exchange of letters between students from the foreign-language environment or even the multimedia exchange has existed since the 1920s [3, 206]. Based on my own experience, I can confirm that the fact of having a pen pal abroad opened the pupils' eyes to an unconventional use of a foreign language and has already broadened their horizons towards culture and multiculturalism. Although the experience comes from my schooling in the socialist system, the friendship with a pen pal from the ex-Soviet Union and one from the ex-GDR lasted until our adult age, and from the historical point of view, the preserved letters are valuable witnesses of the no-longer-existing states with all their customs, traditions and culture.

The relationship between technology and language teaching has never been as complex and interesting as it is today. The digital media and social networks will be spread continuously and rapidly and, together with the ever more frequent use of electronically-mediated communication, promise that electronic language teaching will

continue to be the fundamental area of education and research. The spread of communication technologies not only brings new sources and opportunities to teachers, but also presents them with new challenges. As Kern [3] suggests, the world is increasingly interconnected, with local and global interaction between individuals and institutions forming the future framework of society as a whole. Since the '90s of the 20th century, people and societies are no longer considered in isolation, all of them are part of the globalized infrastructure. We are talking about a global fluid society, a networked society leading to postmodern globalization [1, 13].

## 2.2. Problems with terms and definitions

In recent decades, telecollaboration has been a focus of interest not only for professionals in the field of foreign language teaching, but also for professionals from different areas of education. These activities were carried out in a relatively isolated form and this also results in the use of different terminology, such as telecollaboration, virtual exchange, online intercultural exchange, globally networked learning environments, teletandem, e-tandem [2, 4].

However, the increased use of the above-mentioned methods in various areas of university education has had both positive and negative consequences. The positive points include the observation that the basic training methodology, based on such pedagogically structured online telecollaboration among groups of students from different cultural levels and geographical locations, showed that these methods are well suited to different educational objectives and teaching contexts. However, the heterogeneity of these activities means that experts who devoted themselves to only one type of activity, such as telecollaborative language teaching, did not know the conclusions of the study of other activities in other fields of study. According to O'Dowd, one of the negative aspects is the variety of technical terminology used by Telecollaboration, which also makes it difficult to understand and participate in practice [3, 4].

Therefore, one of the first tasks was to find an appropriate term that would be acceptable and applicable to a wide range of researchers and practitioners. Telecollaboration was a widely used term, as evidenced by a whole series of publications, conferences and online essays. However, outside the foreign language area, it was nearly unknown, which is why the term virtual exchange is increasingly used today. It is favoured by training organizations (such as Soliya, Sharing Perspectives), foundations and governmental bodies (such as the European Commission). A number of researchers in this field consider Virtual Exchange to be an appropriate umbrella of all these

initiatives and activities and the task of disseminating this trend has been taken over, first and foremost, by the academic organization Unicollaboration -- the Cross-Disciplinary Organization of Telecollaboration and Virtual Exchange in Higher Education [4, 4].

It is also difficult to opt for a single definition of the term because of the wide range of references relating to online exchange. The basic premise is already included in the word telecollaboration, 'tele' meaning distance and 'collaboration' meaning as much as cooperation. In some definitions, culture also appears at the center of this collaboration.

I mention the most important definitions here, each of which has a different dimension, and thus they also illustrate the developments that have shaped the practice of telecollaboration:

*a "partnership in which internationally-dispersed learners in parallel language classes use Internet communication Tools" (emails, chats, forums) to support "social interaction, dialogue, debate, and intercultural exchange" [2, 5].*

*"Telecollaboration is understood to be internet-based intercultural exchange between people of different cultural/national backgrounds set up in an institutional context with the aim of developing both language skills and intercultural communicative competence" [6, 28].*

*"The engagement of groups of learners in extended periods of online intercultural interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of their educational programmes and under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators". [4, 5].*

All three definitions mention the possibility of communication between groups that are geographically or culturally distant. Belz limits Telecollaboration to a partnership between students from language courses. Helmet points out the two components that are promoted by Telecollaboration -- that is, linguistic competence in the target language and intercultural competence. For O'Dowd, and in the latest developments, Virtual Exchange is seen as an opportunity for students to acquire soft skills and key competences that are useful in their later professional life.

### 2.3. Brief insight into the recent period of Telecollaboration

It is no wonder that, since the early days of the Internet, the field of foreign language teaching has involved and applied the virtual exchange method very intensively in the training process as an important teaching tool. Teachers of foreign languages soon discovered great potential of the method, which was to connect their students with their counterparts in another country. In this way, students' interest in interacting with their

partners aroused, and almost genuine experience in communicating in the respective foreign language was acquired.

Since the '90s of the 20th century, the e-tandem method has been known. It is based on the autonomy of students and their ability to continue the learning process outside the classroom. The role of the teacher is minimized, the role of tutors including their responsibility has been taken over by the participants/ native speakers themselves; as a result, they communicate in two languages (50% in each), in order to acquire a partner language. They are in mutual interaction, both in terms of content and of language, and based on feedback or alternative statements in the target language, they are making progress in learning the chosen foreign language.

Later, the following model will appear, called intercultural collaboration or online intercultural exchange. It places a greater emphasis on intercultural communication and greater integration of online communication in the training process, as well as on the role of the teacher who prepares individual projects and tasks.

Apart from the linguistic development of its participants, telecollaboration is, primarily, based on intercultural awareness and other aspects of intercultural communicative competence. The groups of students and teachers, who are in face-to-face contact design, analyze and assess interactions and their products, such as videos, blogs, chats, etc. A small example: O'Dowd [4, 10] taught a group of German students the basic techniques of the ethnographic interview in English as a foreign language. These interviews were then realized in the interaction with the American counterparts in the form of video conferences and emails, and afterwards the students wrote essays on the subject. The combination of synchronous (videoconferencing took place in real time) and asynchronous (e-mails) means enabled students to deal with the different aspects of intercultural competence.

Towards 2010, the development of virtual exchange split into two different directions. The first approach has little to do with the teaching process; it is rather about acquiring language and cultural experience in the context of specialized interests or in the Internet environment, which focuses on specific hobbies and interests. In this context, Thorne [7, 144] talks about wild intercultural communication, which, of course, is not as organized as teaching at school, but it can be more interesting to students and their motivation to become more active.

The second direction is linked to the training process, with an effort to integrate the method more closely and more consistently into formal training. It is argued that if virtual exchange is a valuable tool in the teaching process, the method should not only be

used as an ancillary activity, but rather, it should be adopted in a university environment, credit-generating activity supported by university management.

### 3. Telecollaboration between Technical University of Ostrava and Grenoble Alpes University

The most important part of the project are the students themselves, their motivation and activity, but at the same time the fundamental prerequisite of the success of the project will be its thorough and careful preparation by the teacher or project leader, which means an enormous amount of time. The preparation of our Telecollaboration within the framework of the Evolve project took place after an extensive online training. For the Czech side, particularly students of the Technical University of Ostrava, Faculty of Economics, this was the first virtual exchange experience. The project was realized in German (level A2 - B1), and for all students it was the second foreign language after English.

First, the form had to be completed -- with all the information about the project and concrete decisions about participant groups, title of the project, dates, tools. Only then did we become an official partner in the Evolve program and were assigned by Evolve to a mentor who accompanied us in our project activities. We also encountered various problems before we started working on the project, as described in the relevant literature. This includes, among other things, the differentiated beginning and length of the semester at both universities and the related coordination of curricula, the creation of a reasonably balanced group of students, consideration of a portable and, if possible, a topic interesting for all in focus, selection of the right communication platforms and tools. From the very beginning, we agreed that we would work the entire semester focused on the project, which means that the project was put in the center of classes.

For the entire project, the Moodle course was created by the French partner on the website of the University of Grenoble, and all participants were enrolled in the course. As for the subject of the project, we supported the concept of 'Heimat' (home) with which different connotations can be combined -- the term gives rise to both personal and intercultural exchanges. Very personal views relate to students' childhood and their own memories of the parent house, well-known places, family and fellow human beings, feelings and fragrances. The cultural dimension in the term 'Heimat' then encompasses the students' presentation of their home or country, with all the symbols, special features, and characteristics. It is the matter of our own reflection of home and of European membership today, which means being a citizen of Europe for each individual. The

intercultural dimension could include the possible differences between the view of 'Heimat' in French and Czech. For example, the German term cannot be easily translated into French. The project aimed to bring young people in Europe closer, to support their European and international understanding, to promote the development of the common awareness of European identity and integration, and to give young people practical examples of European living together as a community.

Three basic tasks were defined as the general framework of the course content according to the Sharing Perspectives model [4, 17]:

- Providing academic content: construct a shared curriculum of participants presented through video lectures.
- Online discussions: students in subgroups discuss the lecture of that project period.
- Engaging in collaborative research: students collaboratively design, conduct and share the research on the project topic.

In O'Dowd's and Ware's opinions [8, 552], these are the three main categories: information exchange tasks, comparison and analysis tasks, and collaborative tasks. All the stages combine different task types and incorporate various learning objectives. The first stage focuses on the development of linguistic skills, whereas the next involves not only linguistic but cultural learning, too. The third stage mostly promotes intercultural learning.

Information exchange tasks pay particular attention to introducing partners' personal biographies, towns, schools, families and allow them to get to know each other and establish personal relationships. While during the first stage learners only exchange information, comparison and analysis tasks require students to conduct comparisons and critical analysis of parallel materials. They are supposed to engage in dialogues with their partners to be able to explain similarities and differences detected in the cultural products. This Cultura model was established by Furstenberg as an intercultural exchange framework, which has been adapted for many different languages. It starts with the notion of cultural comparisons and 'offers a comparative approach that asks learners to observe, compare and analyse parallel materials from their respective cultures' [9, 58].

The third task type, the collaborative tasks, is the most demanding one. The students are required to agree on their joint project and produce it together. This stage containing the completion of collaborative tasks means a great number of opportunities for exchanging opinions.

According to the recommended phases of the project, the first task of our own project contained mutual acquaintance and selection of concrete partners in the group, usually two Czech and two French students. Task two was concentrated on Cultura project -- the students completed cultural questionnaires - word associations and phrases connected with the main topic, and then compared the answers of both groups -- Czech and French: in this way they developed their own cultural awareness and intercultural competence. The answers were discussed either in a synchronous meeting or in a forum. In the final phase of the project the students were required to collaboratively think up their own project in a small group -- to agree on an idea and then put it into the selected form, subsequently thinking about its appropriate presentation -- in the form of video, short film, interactive poster, Padlet, Power Point presentation, etc.

Apart from their own work on the project, the students also had to deal with the necessary additional activity, which was primarily the e-Portfolio. Here, they mainly focused on two points. Firstly, they assessed their intercultural competence on the basis of each task, in other words, to what extent they were capable of interacting adequately and satisfactorily with the project partners from another culture and what new experiences they gained. The second point was feedback on deepening and expanding their foreign language skills.

### 3.1. The project's progress

In order to fulfill the first task, the introductions round, the padlet was installed on the project website, where each student uploaded two posts -- one with the drawing (mostly caricature) including a short presentation of his fellow student and the others with a couple of complementary words about himself, a photo and the audio file. To make it even more interesting, Flipgrid was embedded on Moodle, where the students uploaded 90-second videos that they had previously recorded by themselves. This made it easier for them to join a group of two from the partner university, depending on their liking and interests.

The first online meeting could then take place and it was intended as an opportunity for a deeper acquaintance and as an exercise preparing students for synchronous interaction. It should be noted that while careful and detailed planning of a project is important, it is much more important to expect that the plans may not always be implemented as you imagine. There are unexpected situations in which even the very best plans can lose their meaning. It is necessary to anticipate the unexpected. As a rule, we were dealing with problems with technology, which unfortunately also made



our project more difficult. Big Blue Button was not the best means of communication, the sound was often lost, which led to asynchronous written communication. After this first synchronous task all had to write a summary of their experiences in the forum. Although the difficulties with sound or video were often mentioned in the speeches, all considered the first meeting as positive. Despite all technical problems, this first students experience with synchronous online communication was motivating for their further cooperation.

The second task was based on the model of the Cultura project. Two questionnaires were prepared, in which students should indicate their word associations to specific terms (for example, home, Europe, the future, multiculturalism) individually and spontaneously and formulate sentences connected with the main topic. Through chat, they evaluated the differences and similarities in the answers and then selected some aspects to which they contributed to the discussion in the forum together. The possible topics to choose from were, for example, the importance of Europe for me and of being an EU citizen, the future of Europe, multiculturalism, relations with Germany, attitude to the European elections held this year.

The asynchronous mode of the forum enabled a deeper reflection as well as a critical distancing of blanket opinions about one's own culture and values:

*[...] critical cultural awareness does not require students to adapt to values of the 'target culture(s)' but rather to be aware of their own values and how they may influence their own behaviour. [10, 18]*

The discussions at the forum show, inter alia, students' positive attitude towards cultural diversity, openness and empathy towards others, as well as their self-critical perspective on their own values or ideas. Many excerpts from the online forum are the signs of intercultural competence as described by the Council of Europe [11]:

## Values

- Valuing human dignity and human rights
- Valuing cultural diversity
- Valuing democracy, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law

## Skills

- Autonomous learning skills

- Analytical and critical thinking skills
- Skills of listening and observing
- Empathy
- Flexibility and adaptability
- Linguistic, communicative and plurilingual skills
- Co-operation skills
- Conflict-resolution skills

### **Attitudes**

- Openness to cultural otherness and to other beliefs, world views and practices
- Respect
- Civic-mindedness
- Responsibility
- Self-efficacy
- Tolerance of ambiguity

### **Knowledge and critical understanding**

- of the self
- of language and communication
- of the world: politics, law, human rights, culture generally, different cultures, religions, history, media, economies, environment, sustainability.

The final stage of the project work was intended for the students to design a joint product in small groups. The idea was to devise an initiative that could help to bring Europe closer to its citizens. The participants could also meet at home using their favourite tools which they are used to. The draft of the project should, of course, include the name or slogan for its action, as well as the reason for the chosen action, taking into account the promotion of European identity, a specific description of the action with individual objectives and expectations as well as the target group of the product. Students had been given examples of possible initiatives that could bring Europe closer to its citizens, such as visiting European cultural cities, organizing cultural moves, a bicycle tour/ music festival/ sports event/ or designing an exhibition. In the last session,

each couple presented their product orally to the class. Unfortunately, for all participants there was no longer time for presentation via video conference.

### 3.2. The added value of Virtual Exchange

Virtual Exchange may be both popular and effective; engaging students in online intercultural collaboration projects is a challenge for both students and teachers.

For students, it means:

- Promoting a diversity of competences
- Joy
- Mobility from home
- International dimension in the curriculum
- More output / deeper language processing processes
- Greater involvement in communication
- Plurilingual competency
- Usage-based perspective
- Interaction

For teachers, it means:

- Learner-driven teaching
- New forms of teaching and learning
- Digital competences
- Intercultural teamwork

Telecollaboration is a very good method that allows students and teachers to gain a lot of experience, and this can literally open the world for them. Here are examples of some students grades:

*„Es war ein sehr interessantes Projekt und ein sehr abwechslungsreicher Unterricht der deutschen Sprache. Wir haben neue Freunde und die französische Kultur kennengelernt. Ich denke, solche Projekte verbessern den Fremdsprachenunterricht an Universitäten.“*

(„It was a very interesting project and a very varied way of learning the German language. We met new friends and got to know French culture, and I think these projects improve the teaching of foreign languages in universities.“)

„Ich denke, diese Projekte motivieren die Menschen, ihre Sprache zu verbessern, um zu versuchen, die Barriere zwischen ihnen zu beseitigen.“

(“I think these projects motivate people to improve their language skills in order to try to remove the barrier between them.”)

„Meine tschechischen Partner ...sind wirklich reizende Personen. Arbeiten mit ihnen durch unser europäisches Projekt war eine Ehre. Sie haben ein wunderbares Video über Prag gemacht. Jetzt habe ich Lust, diese Hauptstadt zu besichtigen.“

(„My Czech partners ... are really charming people. The collaboration on our European project was an honour for us. They have made a wonderful video about Prague, and now I want to visit this capital city.”)

## 4. Conclusions

Participation in the Virtual Exchange project requires quite a lot of effort, well thought-out planning and a certain degree of flexibility even for an experienced teacher, but the benefits of such work are obvious. The common training objective is to develop verbal skills, digital skills, intercultural awareness and the ability to cooperate with people from different backgrounds. It is not easy for individuals in today's world to find their attitude to all its political, religious and regional conflicts. And telecollaboration has great potential to enrich the teacher and especially students with new experiences, in the sense that it opens the world for them further. Also, the role of educators is to encourage students to better communicate with people from other cultures, and telecollaboration seems to be one of the best means of achieving this. When young people join forces and try to understand each other's cultures and mentality, they can become friends, and this is the best challenge for the future of the world.

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